Navigating through the Multivalent Notions of 'Normative': A Faith Community's Reflections

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I am arguing for a normative component in religious education (RE) as a distinct factor that characterizes RE, although there is less consensus on what constitutes such 'normative' when it comes to a faith community. In this paper, I will first attempt to understand this idea from scholarly publications. Subsequently, the key aim of this study will be to demonstrate through the perspectives of the practitioners of religious education of Ismaili community how the key stakeholders navigate, define and redefine on day to day basis with their students and teachers of religious education 'the norms' that hold the community together. This paper explores why these practitioners struggle to arrive at one universal notion of 'the normative.' The notions of tradition change, power, and authority are critical in these negotiations. In the midst of the changing context, are there constant threads that can unite community while also enabling its members to articulate their identity? More importantly, who are the actors involved in a 'legitimate' articulation? Besides referring back to the nature of this concept itself which may lead to such equivocality, through the example I am discussing here, I will as well attempt to demonstrate a link of this discussion to notion to religious study: how can the lessons learned from my study help faith communities to understand religious education in a different light.

The study is based on interviews with eight religious education teachers and five professionals engaged in the training of teachers. The study argues that 'normative' is not one single narrative but a collection of narratives and meta-narratives which the intellectuals in the community discursively arrive at. The idea of religious authority plays an important role in passing certain 'norms' from the intellectuals of the community to the individual members. I also conclude that defining the 'normative' in a very rigid fashion can lead to the danger of entering into the domain of 'orthodoxy' – or 'the Right Teaching,' which can be used as a tool to exclude those with so-called 'wrong teachings.' The notion of normative is best captured in non-literal or exploratory terms rather than literal and rigid terms, featuring religious identities as creative and evolving, thus resulting in more inclusionary outcomes rather than exclusionary ones. The Ismaili Imam and Imamat (i.e., the institutions he set up, religious education professionals are an active part of this network) become my case study to provide this alternative vision.

INTRODUCTION

The Secondary Religious Education curriculum of the Ismaili Muslim community explores the humanistic, civilizational, and normative dimensions of religious education[1]. Elaborating on

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[1] "Course Overview," Secondary Teacher Education Program, Institute of Ismaili Studies, accessed 20th May, 2021, https://www.iis.ac.uk/graduate-studies/step-course-overview.

these three dimensions, the introduction to the curriculum (under the heading of "Islam – a humanistic, civilisational and normative approach") states that:

> [T]he study of beliefs and practices form an important but not an exclusive dimension of the curriculum. These aspects are approached from historical and comparative viewpoints as they evolved in general Muslim and Ismaili history. The curriculum also embraces other aspects which reflect a range of human endeavours and pursuits that have manifested themselves in Muslim societies, including Ismaili contexts: art, literature, science, commerce, law, philosophy and education. Within this broader framework, the secondary curriculum strives to encourage in the Ismaili youth a commitment to their faith and community, and to make them consciously reflective of being Ismailis. To this end, the curriculum pays explicit attention to the Shia Ismaili interpretation of Islam, and to the Ismaili Tariqah within the Muslim *umma*. Students are also made aware of other traditions through a comparative approach by highlighting their distinctive as well as common character. It is hoped that the secondary curriculum will engender in the youth a broad-minded outlook that enables them to be grounded in their own Ismaili tradition while also being educated about the wider historical and cultural contexts in which this tradition has been expressed.[2]

This is the first reference to 'normative' in the curriculum, with only a broad reference to the term itself. Considering 'normative' element as a unique component of the religious education, and taking the presence of the idea in the said curriculum as a starting point, the present study is an effort to explore various meanings attached to the idea of 'normativity,' through the scholarly works and mainly interactions with the teaching professionals, practitioners, and scholars in the field.

The inquiry presented in this paper has been inspired by concerns in the field of religious studies with regard to the content and approach of a religious education curriculum. Some of these are: how does a curriculum present the fundamental beliefs of a community in a manner that facilitates thinking, learner's religious formation, and even strengthening of one's belief system? Bringing insights from anthropology into the inquiry, how does one approach a religious belief, knowing that there can be many ways of living and practicing that belief?

Talal Asad, in his seminal work *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,* states: "…If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition, that includes and relates to the founding texts of the Qur'an and Hadith. A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a

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[2] Introduction to IIS Secondary Curriculum, Teacher's Guide to Muslim societies and Civilizations (London: Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2013), 6.

history.[3]" How far is instructing regarding the correct form and practice be considered the sole aim of religious education? Should religious rites and practices acquire the centre position in religious education? Elsewhere he states that 'the most urgent theoretical need for an anthropology of Islam is of formulating the right concepts.' As an advocate of the idea of 'discursive tradition,' he states that it is just one such 'right' concept. Although the concept of discursive tradition has generated productive discussions in academia, my aim will be to problematize this notion of 'correct/right' teaching and, more importantly, to demonstrate how does it lead to more extreme ideas stemming from constructs such as 'orthodoxy,' which as I will share in due course, is even questionable concept in Muslim context due to a lack of centralized authority for the entire Muslim *umma*.[4]

It will be my aim to address these questions during the theoretical discussion in the course of this paper. This discussion draws inspiration from the findings of an empirical study for which I had interviewed eight individuals and consulted five professionals engaged in teacher training to understand their perceptions of this notion (findings related to this study are shared in the latter half of the paper). The inquiry concludes by focusing on the multivalent nature of the idea of 'normative,' which leads to the many negotiations that the practitioners engage with during their educational attempts. I want to establish through this study that the many varied explanations of this notion of 'normative' are not a drawback but rather an essential and necessary feature of the community and its leadership which allows us to explore the dynamics between authority, power, and truth in the Ismaili community. Besides, examining the idea from a comparative perspective as developed in the scholarly literature forms a wide spectrum of sociological and philosophical explanations of the concept to a more scripture-based and theistic one. In looking at this spectrum, I ask: where to situate the notion of 'normative' as the Ismaili community understands it? Also, how does one stay away from 'orthodoxy,' or the so-called 'right teaching' which negates others' understanding as wrong? The final question that I ask and explore through this study is: how can we distinguish between 'normativity' and 'orthodoxy'?

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[3] Talal Asad, *The idea of an anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 20.

[4] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 270.

SCHOLARLY UNDERSTANDING - SURVEY OF SELECT LITERATURE ON 'NORMS'

From the sociological point of view, the idea of a 'norm' implies an 'established and expected form of social behaviour,' 'a set of implicit rules' and 'models of what should happen.'[5] While referring to norms, Durkheim's notion of 'social facts' and these being independent of the individuals in a society and their connection to the 'sanctions' inevitably emerges, which are imposed as a result of the breach of the social norms[6]. This inevitable connection that sociology draws between 'norms' and 'sanctions' and the expectation with the word 'normal' for anything that is 'common currency' should be noted. While the term used from sociological point of view seemingly has a sense of being value neutral, I would want to highlight that a very distinct meaning of the word 'normative' can as well be proposed, which connects to values and in terms of religious education, even teaching of values. The philosophical meaning can be referred to as an alternative. The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought as well first highlights the social aspect of 'normative' that the standards or values involved are those of some social group rather than of an individual[7] but stating the specific application at the same time, it refers to the philosophical usage in the following words:

> In philosophy, the label is applied to value-judgements by emotivists and other adherents of the doctrine of the naturalistic fallacy, who conclude that the truth or the falsity of value-judgements cannot be assessed. Logic, likewise, is sometimes called a normative science because it does not simply classify the forms of inference that are actually followed but critically selects, and by implication recommends, those it regards as valid. A valid inference, after all, is one whose conclusions ought to be accepted if its premises are.[8]

Thus, there is a strong value judgement embedded in this meaning of the term normative. Mentioning the sociological perspective in this discussion does not limit itself to the issue of value neutrality alone. As per the above quote, "the truth or the falsity of value-judgements cannot be assessed." Thus, those who observe a system from outside may find that what is normative lacks scientific credibility or that the arguments are self-referential or even circular. Stephen Turner has mentioned such difficulties with the concept of normative from a social scientific point of view in his book *Explaining the Normative.*[9] Dealing with all the

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[5] Anna Grimshaw, "norms," in *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock, Stephen Trombley, Alf Lawrie (London: Hyper Collins Publisher, 1999), 594.

[6] Grimshaw, "norms," 594.

[7] Aaron Sloman, "normativity" in *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock, Stephen Trombley, Alf Lawrie (London: Hyper Collins Publisher, 1999), 595.

[8] Anthony (Lord) Quinton, "normative (philosophy)" in *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock, Stephen Trombley, Alf Lawrie (London: Hyper Collins Publisher, 1999), 595.

[9] Stephen Turner, *Explaining the Normative* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 29.

conflict areas between these may not be possible in the present study, but I would like to address some critical issues here as it will allow me to build my argument further.

NORMATIVITY – A SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE POINT OF VIEW

To begin with, in some of the fiercest critiques of the idea of normativity, Stephen Turner frames his argument in a tightly binary fashion: for example, quoting Robert Brandom's comments on disenchantment thesis of Max Weber, he concludes: "Brandom proposes to re-enchant the world by reinstating the belief in normative powers, which is to say powers in some sense outside of and distinct from the forces known to science.[10]" His critique is so sharply put forward that he almost declares the idea of 'normative' as anti-scientific. Calling what normativism tries to achieve 'a double game', Turner critiques the idea further:

> They explain the realities in terms of a deeper reality hidden within. This hidden reality is systematically different from and different than the empirical reality…The intrinsic features provide normative standards, which are systematically discrepant from what actually occurs. But this double game is also what gives the disenchanters their opening. They can deny that there is anything intrinsically there or necessarily there. This is the core of the issue of normativity: *normativity is a name for non-natural, non-empirical stuff that is claimed to be necessarily, intrinsically there, and to in some sense account for the actual* (emphasis mine).[11]

My primary critique of Turner's argument is that it assumes scientific reality as the par excellence form of reality such that it has powers to act as a yardstick to pronounce the validity of other modes of being in the world. There is also a belief implicit in the author's thoughts that no other way of being in the world can exist or explain the reality around us as science can do.

Can science claim to be that yardstick to measure every phenomenon in the physical world? Should all events be surrendered to science for justifying their validity? Are there no realities that escape science's grip and fall outside its domain? Indeed, religious truth is one of the important domains that also represents a distinct way of knowing.

Moreover, if faith was to be administered by the scientists alone, what kind of role could we expect from them in children's religious formation? In an interesting anecdote, Turner helps us understand the limitation of scientific methods in explaining away certain realities. It will also give us an opening to our next argument. Turner relies on Marcel Mauss's account of gift exchange among the Maori.[12] Turner compares the accounts given by a Maori lawyer and

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[10] Turner, *Explaining the Normative,* 4.
[11] Turner, *Explaining the Normative,* 5.
[12] Turner, *Explaining the Normative,* 59.

Mauss himself in how they differ in their treatment of a mysterious force, *hau*, which attaches itself to the gift and obliges the recipient to provide something in return.[13] Mauss prefers to describe the gift exchange as merely a reciprocal one, without giving much credit to the *hau*, a force that the Maori believe enforces the obligation by causing pain or even death. There is an acceptance by Turner that the way Mauss describes the gift exchange is in a 'disenchanted way' as it leaves out the critical component of *hau* and that the Maori would not accept such a description.[14] Despite this confession, Turner also supports the thought that as a social scientist, Mauss did not need to believe in *hau* as the locals would do.

Turner's example opens a possibility for an honest discussion that however social scientific community may choose to treat the Maori gift exchange, there is no denial on the part of the Maori community that specific facts in the physical world remain unexplained and unaccounted for if we were to take scientific recourse solely. Just like poetry or a mystical experience can only be described from a distance with the help of science, certain phenomena require more than scientific explanations to justify and understand them.[15]

COMMAND, ILLUSIVE NEED FOR COHERENCE AND DANGERS OF ORTHODOXIZING

In our attempt to conceptualize 'normativity' so far, we have referred to philosophical, sociological, and literary explanations of the term; we have also attempted to establish the need for the idea in filling a void that science leaves for a community's faith formation through a critique from a social science point of view. In highlighting further aspects of the concept of normativity, I would want to draw on a common method of arriving at the idea in a faith community. This feature can help us clearly spell one of the prominent issues with this notion and direct us towards alternative conceptualization(s) of the idea of 'normative.'

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[13] Turner, *Explaining the Normative,* 60.
[14] Turner, *Explaining the Normative,* 60.
[15] One of the explanations by the author states this fact very clearly: "It is common for theologians to argue that sociological accounts of this ritual are wrong or insufficient because they omit reference to actual presence of God, which is an essential feature of what is happening. The sociologist, in short, changes the subject. The sociologist is not talking about genuine communication. And to describe a social activity in religious terms amounts to helping themselves to a normative concept that they don't acknowledge the validity of. There is no understanding without belief, according to this familiar doctrine. In one respect, the theologians are quite right: describing the gift relation as Mauss does is to redescribe it in a disenchanted way. Mauss's problem is to explain it within ordinary stream of explanation, and in this context, this means that the explanatory problem is to show how the relationship actually operates in light of the Maori beliefs in *hau*…" But yet again he concludes the section with these words: "The burden of proof is on the normativist to show that his normativities do not also require an enchanted causal world and that normative force is something other than a piece of mysticism." Turner, *Explaining the Normative,* 60-63.

To demonstrate my point, I have taken support of Omar Farahat's book *The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology*, where the author takes the classical debate between Ashʿarī and Muʿtazilī schools on divine speech as the basis of understanding norms. He specifically takes command as a form of divine speech designed to enjoin action and the imperative mood as a particular linguistic form that expresses the commands.[16] One striking feature of Farahat's study is that the study takes divine utterances as the basis of identifying 'norms,' which are primarily concerned with bringing about behavioural shifts. The strategy used is identifying the command forms in the divine speech, which allows the author to identify particular linguistic registers that reveal the divine intention to effect change in human behaviour. This is one of the key defining features of the scholarly literature dealing with 'norm' in that it has obedience and compliant behaviour at its centre. At the beginning of this section, I quoted the definition of 'norms' from a social scientific perspective (Durkheim's idea of social facts), where 'sanctions' also emerged as the critical aspect or rather the flip side of 'norms.' The experts and professionals whom I interviewed for this study gave me a different explanation. I will elaborate on this later in the paper and explain why they differ in their approach.

In this section and the next, I am addressing questions like: is Farahat's the only way to theorize 'normativity'? Are there issues with such conceptualization? And more importantly, what needs is such conceptualization addressing? Are there any dangers which such conceptualization can lead to? Moreover, is there an implicit understanding of authority that such a conception assumes?

In order to explore these questions, I will take support of two authors Shahab Ahmed and Talal Asad, as they argue on these questions, and ultimately Professor Mohammed Arkoun's works as well can add more insights.

While Omar Farahat's work mentioned above strives to identify the command form from the scripture and sayings of the prophet, thus aiming to be coherent and consistent in finding particular injunctions which are addressed towards the believers to obey, Shahab Ahmed in his book *What is Islam?* problematised this idea to a great extent. He takes the philosophical and Sufi thought, wine-drinking, and figural painting as examples to establish that "*to conceptualize Islam first and foremost in terms of concern to prescribe the correct is*

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[16] Omar Farahat, The Foundation of Norms in Islamic Jurisprudence and Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 132.

to lose sight of an undertaking to explore the meaningful (emphasis mine)."[17] His book shows examples on these issues of wine-drinking and figural painting and so on from the literary canon of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex (it is worth noting that he refrains from consulting scripture alone for this exercise) and, as a result, notes that

> the basic expressive tenor of its discourse is the exploration of ambiguity, the celebration of ambivalence and fascination of contradiction. This discourse is not governed by an authoritative urge to fix the limitations of the correct—rather, it is informed by the urge to explore and expand the dimensions of the meaningful.[18]

The study I had conducted with the teaching professionals rendered multiple understandings of the idea of normative. Responses like moral values, the spiritual leader (Imam)'s authority, cultivating love and obedience towards the Imam, etcetera were all received from them. The question I posed was, why do I have a sense of uneasiness in recording so many varied responses to my question? Is there an assumption and even an urge for uniformity and sameness (a very similar urge that we discover in Omar Farahat's work which tries to offer a set formula to arrive at what is normative so that, like mathematics, everyone applying that formula received the same response in any place and time)? Studying some of the classical works that theorised Islam revealed that I was not alone nourishing such a hidden urge. In fact, authors' attempts to conceptualise Islam by keeping this urge for uniformity has led to distinct constructs of 'Islam' itself! I will take the example of Talal Asad here, in whose opinion, "although Islamic traditions are not homogenous, they aspire to coherence, in the way all discursive traditions do.[19]" For Asad, coherence is an ideal state for any discursive tradition, and if that is the case, then he also states what happens to those elements which do not cohere in a tradition, and he uses the tool of orthodoxy for this task:

> Orthodoxy is crucial to all Islamic traditions…Orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship of power to truth. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy. The way these powers are exercised, the conditions that make them possible (social, political, economic, et cetera), and the resistances they encounter (from Muslims and non-Muslims) are equally the concern of an anthropology of Islam, regardless of whether its direct object of research is in the city or in the countryside, in the present or in the past…Reason and argument are necessarily involved in traditional practice…It should be anthropologist's first task to describe and analyse the kind of reasoning, and the reasons for arguing that underlie the traditional Islamic practices. It is here that the analyst may discover a central modality of power, and of the resistance it

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[17] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?* 287.
[18] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?* 286.
[19] Talal Asad, *The idea of an anthropology of Islam,* 23.

encounters…Power and resistance, are thus intrinsic to the development and exercise of any traditional practice.[20]

It is interesting to note that for Asad, the idea of instituting a correct practice is and the use of power and resistance in the service of such a project are essential features of any tradition. Even the way phrases and statements like orthodoxy being 'a distinctive relationship of power to truth', Muslims have 'power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones' seem to follow very linear and simplistic notions of terms like 'truth,' 'correct,' 'incorrect' and so on. One could pose a question, "Who makes the decisions about a practice being correct or incorrect? Is there a commonly accepted authority across the board in Islam as there is in Christianity?" Even before we mention authority and their power to sanction, the notion of truth is sharply critiqued by Mohammed Arkoun (an author we will be turning to next) as he poses this question: "Under what verifiable conditions does the idea of truth acquire such strength as to command a destiny of an individual or produce a collective history?[21]" Günther informs us that this question can be regarded as the central *leitmotifs* of Arkoun's entire work.[22] The need to cohere reigns in such a construction of a tradition, and for that matter, notions of authority, sanction, and power relations all become inseparable parts of this definition.

We could take a step back to question the danger of having norms that speak the language of correct and incorrect? Professor Mohammed Arkoun "advocated a critical reading of Islamic reason. This critique includes a radical rethinking of Islam as a cultural and religious system. In addition, it gives rise to a general critique of epistemology. Such a framework provides the possibility of leaving aside theological and dogmatic 'a priories' and enables the scholar to focus on philosophical and mental structures regarding Islamic reason."[23] He put forward the concept of *dogmatic enclosure,* which refers to a decisive break within the history of Islamic thought, putting an end to the innovative period of philosophical thought while contributing to the closing of the *bab al-ijtihad*[24] (or the gates of ijtihad, a term closely referring to innovative thinking).

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[20] Talal Asad, *The idea of an anthropology of Islam,* 22.
[21] Ursula Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought" in Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 134.
[22] Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought", 134.
[23] Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought", 131.
[24] Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought", 132.

As discussed earlier, regarding the idea of coherence, the dogmatic enclosure prevents any competing claims against the tenets of a faith[25] and thus maintains consistency and coherence "because the group members share the same framework of perception and representation/expression.[26]" More importantly, introducing Arkoun's concept of *unthought* and *unthinkable* concerning the idea of dogmatic enclosure, Günther states that "[F]urthermore, it explains the fact that discontinuities within Islamic thought and history have not been picked out as a theme but rather disappeared in the sphere of the *unthought* and *unthinkable*." This, in my opinion, is a significant point to highlight since, through the concept of the *unthought* and *unthinkable,* Arkoun makes us think about the high stakes in maintaining the coherence and consistency of a tradition.

CAN THE ORTHODOX BE SUBSTITUTED FOR THE NORMATIVE?

It is a tendency amongst scholars to use the words 'orthodox' and 'normative' interchangeably[27] as if some altering in the words' meaning could render it safe to be replaced by another. Nevertheless, I would want to critique this tendency and thereby arrive at a more extensive notion that these two concepts have a fundamentally different relation to power, and this feature renders them qualitatively very different from each other.

While drawing on Foucault's idea of an 'épistèmé' (and on Arkoun's notion of dogmatic closure), we have known that "the set of procedures which produce knowledge and keep knowledge in circulation" determines what counts as factual and in each historical period, this set of rules and conceptual tools for thinking about what counts as facts changes.[28] Through Foucault's same body of knowledge, we also learn phrases like 'regimes of truth' that each society has and which determines the type of statements that can be made by authorized people and accepted by the society as a whole and which are distinguished from false statements by a range of different practices.[29] This relationship of truth to knowledge and power favours certain

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[25] For more explanation on how this is done, Günther quotes Arkoun "The term 'dogmatic enclosure' applies to the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of belief and unbelief (q.v.) to operate freely without any competing action from inside or outside. A strategy of refusal, consisting of an arsenal of discursive constraints and procedures, permits the protection and, if necessary, the mobilsation of what is presumptuously called faith (q.v.). No green light has ever been given to a deconstruction of the axioms, tenets and themes that hold together and establish the adventurous cohesion of every faith". Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought", 133.

[26] Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought", 133.

[27] One example can be seen here: SherAli Tareen, Normativity, Heresy, and the Politics of Authenticity in South Asian Islam, (The Muslim World; Jul 2009; 99, 3; ProQuest), 521

[28] Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault*, (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 71.

[29] Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault*, 74.

groups and marginalizes others. These rigid and constrained workings of knowledge and subsequently of power were easily seen through Arkoun's depiction of orthodoxy, graphically presented in the diagram below.[30]

The diagram is a stark reminder that due to the strict hierarchical relation between the guardians of knowledge and those governed by it, orthodoxy operates on the principle of one-way traffic of power. The orthodoxy in the diagram controls determines, creates, fosters,
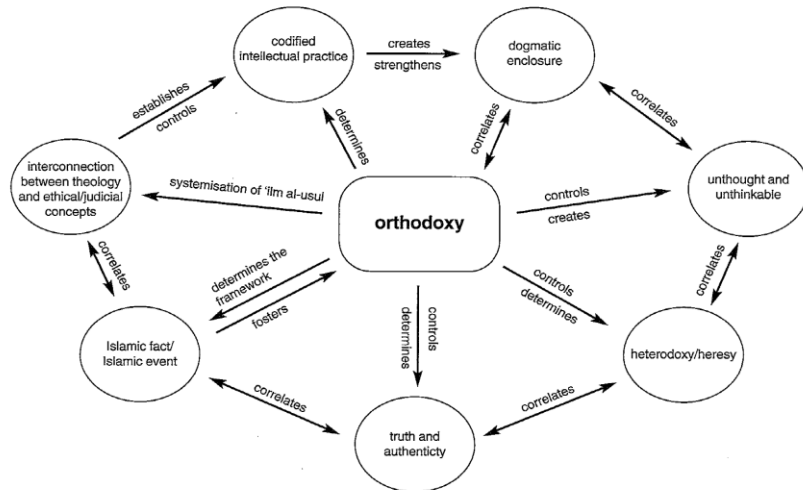

Diagram 1

and establishes other factors. The least agency is given to those on the receiving end of the knowledge. Even the notions of sanctions relate to this conception of regulating knowledge. In his article "The Limits of Orthodoxy," Norman Calder asks, "what are the outside limits of 'right beliefs' for the Sunnis?"[31] How would this question differ if we drew a parallel between orthodoxy and normativity? Could asking the same question make sense for the idea of normativity? I argue that it does not because it is the high concentration of power in the idea of orthodoxy which permits such constructions and questions.

I also argue that an ecosystem that promotes and sustains orthodoxy is replete with elements like knowledge that needs to be regulated, authorities who are charged with the task of such practices, and other technologies which help the system undertake such tasks. But on the other hand, the elements of 'normativity' highlighted in this paper allow us an opportunity to put forward a unique notion much distinct from 'orthodoxy.'

My interviewees defined the idea of normativity in multiple ways, all of them drawing themselves on institutional narratives or historical sources. The lack of one monolithic idea of 'the normative' is not a flaw but rather a strength since each actor had a broad understanding of the term, and depending on the issue at hand and suitability for their audiences, they

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[30] Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought", 140.

[31] Norman Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy", in F. Daftary (ed.), Intellectual Traditions in Islam, (London: IB Tauris, 2000), 66.

articulate the idea in their respective circumstances. This feature of the ability to exercise agency rather than acting as passive dupes of the system, in my opinion, gives the idea of normative a very distinct relation to power.

Moreover, the exclusivity that the orthodox notions in a faith command, by which other 'false ideas' have to go out of circulation in order for the 'true' idea to reign, is absent injunctions will argue later; there is a multiplicity of ideas in a normative domain. This feature enables the active agent to exercise exploratory reasoning among a range of meanings.

Even through the notion of authority, we are able to discern the distinction between the two ideas. In order to explain the role of authority in this construction, Ahmed puts forward two categories of normative:

> On the one hand, norms conceived of by their proponents as authoritatively prescriptive and which those proponents are able to and seek to assert through legal sanctions and on the other, norms conceived of by their proponents as *non-prescriptive and non-authoritative the assertion of which is not sought through legal sanction*. It is important to distinguish, in all societies including the Islamic societies, between these two differently constituted categories of norms: *it is the first category of norms that is meaningfully characterized by the term "orthodoxy" and the second by "normativity"* (emphasis mine). [32]

Authoritative and prescriptive, in Shahab Ahmed's opinion, distinguishes orthodoxy from normativity. Although I want to suggest a change to this categorization and the characterization of the category of the normativity as it is defined here: norms conceived of by their proponents as *non-prescriptive* and *non-authoritative*. According to our discussion so far, non-prescriptive is a critical feature of the idea of 'normative,' where exploratory reasoning and creativity are given priority over rigid and exclusive ideas, implemented through sanctions. But when the author refers to non-authoritative as another feature of normativity, I would want to take this opportunity to highlight a distinct relation that 'normative' has to 'authority' in the context under discussion in this paper. Extending this relationship can also help us redefine the idea of 'normative' afresh. I would want to situate this discussion in the Ismaili Muslim context. First, let us review how Shahab Ahmed elaborates on the definitions of both terms:

> Those commitments and practices which are answerable to the demands of the ʿulamāʾ/"religious experts"—who render Muslim subjects answerable to them (that is, to both norms and ʿulamāʾ) by acting for/through the state by instruments of legal sanction—is orthodoxy, the social existence of which requires the authority to impose sanction on dissenters, but does not require "ecclesiastical authority" per se. The normative is produced by a much more diffuse set of social actors and discursive

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[32] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 285 n85.

practices than those of the ʿulamāʾ/"religious experts" alone, and does not seek or enjoy the same authority of sanction.

For Ahmed, the authority of sanction is linked closely with the ecclesiastical authority: for him, the category of normative is less authoritative because of the less stringent authoritative power attached to it. But looking at the Ismaili context, I would want to critique this idea. Over and above the category of experts and 'a much more diffuse set of social actors than the religious experts alone', Ismailis have the idea of a legitimate leadership, i.e., the Imamat:

> To the Shi'ites, the term imam has a different signification altogether (compared to other Shi'i communities like Twelvers and Zaydis). It refers to a member of the family of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt), and usually to a member of 'the family' as descended from Muhammad's daughter Fatima and to the infallible guide to the community[33]

How this authority plays out in Sunni as well as Shia context (and thus situating it as a unique idea for the latter), he mentions: "In Sunni law, legal authority can legitimately reside in scholars (muftis, alims, maulvis, and so on) in the absence of any superior authority. Thus, it is the scholars who delineate—albeit not in an inerrant manner—the requirements of the law. In the Shia case, however, matters are different. In addition to the Prophet, one can look to the Imams as holding Qur'anically affirmed, divinely inspired authority.[34]"

Thus, Shahab Ahmed's conception of *non-prescriptive* and *non-authoritative* need to be understood in this context: because the nature of authority is different in Shi'i Imami Ismaili context, the normative discourse is guided, supported, and nourished by "the Imam, who is the exclusive holder of legitimate leadership and of singular spiritual authority, which endows him with inerrant scriptural and religious interpretation."[35] Yet, my point is that merely because we have established the idea of the authority in a community, does not change the normative discourse to an orthodox one. Instead, I would argue that the nature and the philosophy by which a leader is guided determines the presence of sanctions and dogmatic enclosures or otherwise (thus, whether a community promotes normative or orthodox discourse). This factor is also responsible for determining how the concept of 'normative' is defined and understood in a community.

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[33] Muhammad Qasim Zaman quoted in Arif Jamal, Authority and Plurality in Muslim Legal Traditions: The Case of Ismaili Law, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 499.

[34] Arif Jamal, Authority and Plurality in Muslim Legal Traditions: The Case of Ismaili Law, (Oxford University Press, 2019), 500.

[35] Najam Haider quoted in Arif Jamal, Authority and Plurality in Muslim Legal Traditions: The Case of Ismaili Law, 500.

For example, Norman Calder, in his quest for the 'limits of orthodoxy' in Sunni Islam, presents scripture, community, gnosis, reason, and charisma as a five-part epistemology for any faith to have knowledge of God. According to this scheme and the following explanation given by him, the Sunni community represented by the scholars (and not scripture alone as it is commonly understood) plays an important role in determining the religious belief of the Sunnis:

> Sunni Islam is a religion in which although everything in one sense is taken back to scripture, in another sense it is ongoing. It is a religion which seems to be demanding of its participants that appropriate acknowledgement be granted to the community as it develops through time (as it is represented by scholar). Every later participation in the forms of literature—and it is through established literary forms and genres that thought takes place—every later statement of faith or assessment of meaning in the Quran, takes into account the earlier statements worked out by the community. The epistemological categories of scripture/revelation and community are always balanced inside Sunni Islam, and always balanced, I would say, in favour of community, not scripture.

In offering the framework above, Calder gives priority to the community, although what is to be noted is that scholars lead the community itself. Through many examples, Calder tries to offer multiple pieces of evidence to suggest that Sunni Islam, even in constant struggles of interpretation between figures like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi on the one hand and Ibn Taymiyya on the other, is accommodative of the alternative tradition. Even though the latter was highly negative about the Muʿtazili tradition, the former still could "hold on to it and make it a means whereby to discover and express the possibilities of Sunni Islam."[36]

It is interesting to note that despite the author suggesting that Sunnism is a discursive tradition and thus, open to multiple possibilities, figures like Ibn Taymiyya and the history they represent tend to block such discourse or turn the discourse in the narrow directions that they deem fit. Conceptually Calder justifies this trend as follows: the Muʿtazila, the philosophers, the Shiʿis, and the Sufis are there to be part of a pool of texts which can be referred to while suggesting the "fine distinctions which distinguish and clarify the Sunni position. The explicit acknowledgement of parallel and erroneous traditions is part of the orthodox tradition. And the articulation of orthodoxy could not be achieved without a discursive exploration of the boundaries that separate the orthodox tradition from those traditions that are acknowledged to deviate from it."[37] The author denotes this process as "intertextuality." Firstly, how open and exploratory is this process if it requires one to define oneself solely in opposition to others?

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[36] Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy", 80.
[37] Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy", 79.

Secondly, despite the author's effort to show that this intertextuality is a neutral process, it is not so. Connected to this argument is the mention of Muhammad Abduh, the twentieth-century reformer in Egypt, who "implied that Muslims should go back to the beginning in order to accommodate themselves to the 19th and 20th centuries. The products of the great intellectual tradition were not to his mind remarkable. For him, much of what these jurists and theologians had produced was of little value; they could safely and wisely be discarded. The community should go back and start all over again with the Quran. The relevant juristic hero for Muhammad Abduh was not Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi, or even Ibn Hanbal, great figures though they all were; it was Ibn Taymiyya. And his usefulness was that he offered a scourge for the intellectual tradition and a banner for revivalism; he represented par excellence Salafi tendency in Islam."[38]

Going back to the process called intertextuality by Calder, it is worth noting that wherever the alternative trends are 'used' within the community, their function, as defined by Calder, is merely to strengthen the community's tradition. Here is my point about the philosophy or worldview which guides those in authority. Where the community is guided by a few scholars like Abduh, who, as Calder concludes, "is the cause of a smaller, more limited Islam than that which was on offer before,"[39] one can expect close-ended outcomes. Calder also puts forth the method that Abduh followed, which was "a method of rejection," and interestingly, through this method, he also targeted the rich and centuries-old mystical tradition in Islam. Calder adds to his comments on this, "he claimed that much mystic lore was nonsense, *khurafat*, he called upon his followers not to listen to them and to get rid of them."[40] Sadly, Abduh's ideas not only guided his contemporaries but also remained in currency for generations afterward. Here I repeat the question posed by Professor Arkoun, which I had quoted earlier in this paper: "*Under what verifiable conditions does the idea of truth acquire such strength as to command a destiny of an individual or produce a collective history?* (emphasis mine)."

On the point about community guiding the beliefs of Sunni Islam (as if neutrally), I disagree with Calder fundamentally, especially after the points of discussion I have put forth in this paper so far. He suggests that in Sunni Islam, more than scripture, it is the community that matters, adding to the point that "Every later participation in the forms of literature—and it is

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[38] Norman Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy", in F. Daftary (ed.), Intellectual Traditions in Islam, (London: IB Tauris, 2000), 85.
[39] Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy", 85.
[40] Calder, "The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy", 85.

through established literary forms and genres that thought takes place—every later statement of faith or assessment of meaning in the Quran, *takes into account the earlier statements worked out by the community* (emphasis mine)." If the community had always taken account of the earlier statements, then it would have been guided by the rich traditions of the Muslim literary, mystical and philosophical advancement since the seventh century, but unfortunately, it is these few learned individuals who are determined to make Islam "a smaller tradition," such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Abduh who end up claiming the monopoly of truth and decide the course of history that the entire Muslim community will take.

A RANGE OF RESPONSES - NORMATIVE AS A WAY OUT OF DOMAIN OF POWER INTO THE DOMAIN OF MEANING

Referring back to my earlier point that orthodoxy and normativity have a very different relation to power and subsequently to authority as well as truth, and having elaborated briefly on these dynamics for the former. Now I will turn to the concept of normativity and the dynamics of power it represents, thus examining possibilities for an alternative vision. Bringing the findings from my empirical study, I want to propose here that the domain of normativity allows space for a range of responses, responses that are creative and inclusive. An openness to accommodate a variety of responses can explore meaning fitting for a belief that is not blindly accepted. I argue that these unique features even allow a very different notion of 'Islam' to be put forth. Since the discussion about normativity cannot be severed from authority and power, this section will lead to a unique vision of the leadership of the Ismaili Muslim community and the possibilities that such a philosophy of leadership opens up. Theoretically, Shahab Ahmed introduces 'exploratory reasoning' as one such unique method stating:

> In conceptualizing Islam, we must certainly attend to "the kind of reasoning, and the reasons for arguing": not just orthodoxizing reasoning addressed at production of unambiguous, bounded and binding meaning but explorative reasoning addressed at the production of ambiguating, potentialities and expanding meaning. This exploratory reasoning valorizes disagreement as a positive condition for the Muslim community and valorizes perplexity as a meaningful condition for the Muslim individual in engagement with the Divine Truth.[41]

> The function of exploratory reasoning, which valorizes disagreement and perplexity, goes well beyond the prescription of the correct and undermining of the incorrect. As Shahab Ahmed notes that the historical bulk of the normative discursive tradition is non-prescriptive and non-orthodoxising…it is explorative of multiplicity of truths and values.[42]

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[41] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 285.
[42] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 286.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Understanding teachers' perceptions about normative was one of my inquiries for an empirical study conducted in Mumbai in the last quarter of 2019 with eight religious education teachers and five professionals engaged with the training of teachers. The questions asked to the teachers ranged between the following: what are your perceptions about the normative aspect in religious education; do you think it is an important aspect of RE; how would you define it and how does this aspect affect your teaching, if at all you think it does. Here I would want to highlight some of the responses received. In most cases, I have retained the words selected by my informants, and some of the well-articulated sentences as well appear in quotation marks as my interviewees spoke them:

Normativity as Big Picture Perspective of the Curriculum

All the respondents, including the teachers and the teacher training professionals, thought that the normative component was an important element of the curriculum they were teaching. What differed was the degree to which they thought it was important and the meaning they attached to the concept of normative. It is an established understanding among the teaching community that one needs to understand the ultimate reason why they are teaching what they are teaching, which can be termed 'the vision' behind the curriculum. Such a vision can help them make effective lesson plans, keep focused and teach to the reason, not just the content of the curriculum[43]. Such a vision can be a statement or a concept—highlighting a perspective—that a teacher would want to teach to and would also want the child to remember. Keeping this understanding in mind, more than half of the teacher respondents thought of normativity as that perspective that guides religious education curriculum as a vision does and gives it a distinct identity from the secular curriculum.

Normative as What Relates to Faith

One respondent said that for her, "the idea of normative is what relates to your faith." She remarked that the secondary curriculum of the Ismaili community clearly states its religious leader (Imam)'s aspiration that he does not want it to be based on a theological approach but civilizational approach along with the normative, thus every time a curriculum is taught, faith has to be brought in. For example, the term normative comes from 'norm' or carpenter's square. Thus, using one's intellect is a norm since humans have been bestowed with the gift of intellect.

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[43] Big Picture Reinforcement, Guide for the Teachers (Internal document).

Like the previous point, this understanding distinguishes religious education from secular education.

Normative as Loyalty and Devotion to the Imam

More than three teachers remarked that the central purpose of religious education is to engender faith in the recipients, but more specifically, they highlighted one area of faith which relates to inculcating love, loyalty, and devotion towards the religious leader of the Ismaili community or the Imam-of-the-Time, as he is referred to (or *Imam e-Zaman* in Persian). The Shiʿi traditional sources have abundant references to the idea of authority of the Imam, also termed as *walaya* in Arabic that refers to this notion.

Normative as Moral Values

"One of the things which the concept of normative can mean is values. It means when one is imparting religious education to kids, there is a strong element of teaching children the value of values. Values evolve, but certain values are universal. All cultures value knowledge as opposed to ignorance; all cultures value health and beauty. Health is a comprehensive concept that includes mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. The notion of values in economic life can also be tied to the curriculum. The moment one thinks about values and communicates about values, s/he is carrying out a normative exercise. The emphasis on value is normative because it is a normative thing to want to advance norms. It is a value that we think of the place of value today, and all faith communities carry out this search in their own way."

Normative as Association with Community

"There is yet another aspect of normativism: the religious education pertains to the children of Ismaili community, and thus, the education they receive should reinforce or help develop a commitment to the Ismaili tradition, to the Ismaili faith and Ismaili community, so that they identify themselves with the community. The term identity is ambiguous and thus can convey this idea very well: different people identify differently with the faith. Some people identify with the community because of its mystical side or because they like the meditation practice (also known as *Ibadat*). Some people will identify with the community because they think going to the place of prayer (or *Jamatkhana*) is beneficial for their emotional, psychological and spiritual, and sociological life. For some people, the tradition of service is powerful, and they would want to contribute via the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN)."

Normative as Centred around Imam's Authority

"Normative does not mean that one pushes, coerces, or preaches students into one or the other idea. But it means cultivating in them a certain empathy or involvement, helping them identify with the community because community exists. Normative education means that we realize and we recognize the importance and centrality of the Imam and his authority. This does not require a particular theory, theology, doctrine or an interpretation of the idea of Imamat, but the authority of the Imam. One can communicate these by looking at the Shiʿi history. This understanding also includes keeping his words and guidance at the centre of religious teaching."

A FRESH VISION FOR NORMATIVE: A CASE-STUDY

Building on the discussion so far, I would want to propose in this section that due to the unique office of religious leadership and the philosophy that the current leader has followed, a distinct understanding of the idea of normative is possible to put forward.

I will centre my argument around the vision of the Aga Khan, religious leader or Imam of the Ismaili Muslim community as the basis of this fresh understanding of the idea of normative, the vision which also transpires in the institutional policies that he implements. What are the components of such a vision which makes this meaning-making possible? And how does this system operate for a distinct notion of normative to emerge? I will take the support of a unique publication[44] that discusses not only the vision of Aga Khan, the current spiritual leader of the Ismailis but also the workings of the developmental network set up by him, called the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Daryoush Mohammad Poor, in his opening chapter, lists the reasons why this case study is apt for his book:

> The language used by the Ismaili imamate is not one with polemic divisions or theological biases. In a world where religious authority is often marked by its theological or polemical positions, the Ismaili imamate has moved beyond polemics or narrow-minded theological divisions and instead presents a humanistic- developmental quality in its authority.[45]

This same feature and many others highlighted by the author set the tone for further research shared in this book on the unique positioning of the Imam and the Imamat. Although it will be outside the scope of this paper to delve a lot on that topic, I have tried here to select elements from the book that help us further our inquiry in my study. As referred to in the

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[44] Daryoush Mohammad Poor, *Authority without Territory: The Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili Imamate* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 20.
[45] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 55.

passage above, the theological aspect is critical in this discussion and requires more clarification.

Under a more extensive argument of transmutation of the way the leadership is understood and portrayed in the community, the author also projects a shift in theology. While in earlier times in Ismaili history, the truth was understood to be embodied in the very person of the Imam and even Imam as the embodiment of the word of God, now in contemporary times, the person of the Imam is transcended into the institutions.[46] These institutions, in the author's point of view, become a symbolic reference to the presence of the Imam, thus freeing him from making any radical changes to the doctrines themselves:[47]

> The thick layer of theological and doctrinal perceptions drawing on truth and the Imam as the truthful master is replaced with a more earthly and easily intelligible symbolism without making any direct intervention to provide an alternative perception of truth.[48]

The author is downplaying the theological truths in favour of the institutional presence, which represents the Imam. For example, he states that in the earlier times, "in the absence of solid and functioning institutions, that theological or more specifically highly esoteric interpretation of truth continued to gain significance."[49] He suggests that in current times, this whole process itself of 'theological fixation'[50] has now acquired less prominence:

> Perhaps one can legitimately argue that—as an effect of this shift— theology and doctrinal opinions have already lost the status they used to enjoy in the past. Hence, this marks another dimension of the shift under scrutiny, i.e. the marginalization of the process of theological fixation…The bedrock of this shift has to be seen in the relation that theology has with the life of the faithful in a religious community in general and in the Ismaili community in particular. What takes priority is not a solid or rigid set of theological or metaphysical doctrines. It is the actual condition and life of the faithful that takes precedence.[51]

Referring to the shifting understandings of the Imamat, he states that apart from the two primary qualities, namely direct bloodline, and clear appointment, all other traits are volatile because they are always subject to interpretation and reformulation.[52] This feature gives much flexibility in the theological formulations, while the core elements remain the same.

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[46] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 80.
[47] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 80.
[48] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 80.
[49] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 80.
[50] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 80.
[51] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 80-81.
[52] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 91.

Another key element that the author focuses on is the pluralistic attitude of the community, the earliest manifestation of which can be cited in his Silver Jubilee message where he guided his community to remove walls and build bridges.[53] As we noted earlier, again through this message, the idea was that rather than theological disputes and demarcations, it is the outlook of inclusivity and tolerance towards others (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) that counted. Despite its history of persecution and attacks on its identity historically and in contemporary times, such a tolerant approach towards others is noteworthy.

However, another factor in this discussion is consultation, which Dr Poor highlights. He gives two examples of Professor Arkoun and the Institute of Ismaili Studies' role in explaining how the current Imam personally takes consultation seriously:

> Mohammed Arkoun was a scholar, a non-Ismaili one, whose thought often stands in sharp contrast with the position of the Ismaili Imam or at least with the orthodox perception of the role and position of the Imam. The Imam is usually obeyed. A Shiʿi Imam rarely gets into a position where he would or could be reasoned with. Yet, the Aga Khan, who carries the heavy weight of tradition behind him, came face-to-face with a character like Mohammed Arkoun, whose life and academic work put him in the position of deconstruction of tradition as such. The Ismaili Imam not only did not shy away from such encounters, but he also encourages and embraces such interactions. Moreover, he puts these same very people in positions of decision-making and judgment in his institutions.[54]

The author states this as one of the examples of how consultation takes place both horizontally and vertically, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) being another example: "In the modern developments in the function of the Imam, one can hardly see the Imam making theological pronouncements. These are the job of experts, professionals, and scholars who are active in the field. This is the raison d'être of the IIS. When matters of concern need theological, philosophical, or religious investigations, they are referred to the IIS, and then the feedback goes to the Imam for his final decision. Therefore, prima facie, such tasks are not undertaken by the Imam himself, at least not directly. The function of the Imam has changed as a result of institutional transformations.[55]" The book is full of such examples and anecdotes which help us understand the nature and breadth of the vision of Karim Aga Khan.

CONCLUSION

Despite being highly aware of various forms of critiques that the term 'normative' invites within academia, my study started with an outright acceptance that, however fiercely debated,

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[53] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 128.
[54] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 134.
[55] Poor, *Authority without Territory,* 134.

'normative' element forms an important part of religious education. In this study, I charted out some of the possible explanations that the term can associate with, along with the pitfalls one needs to be aware of. Ultimately, I argued that situating this discussion within a context can best help us draw connections of the idea with dynamics of power, truth, and authority and also put forward a unique definition of 'normative,' that is not limited in its nature but expands meaning and promotes inclusivity through its multivalent nature. A vision that attaches less importance to the theological truths and provides individual agents with opportunities and space to articulate their ideas without fear of sanctions or anxieties for coherence offers one model towards an alternative vision of truth, and I would say of 'Islam' itself.

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